Pontiac Building
542 South Dearborn Street, Northwest
corner Dearborn and Harrison Streets
Chicago
Cook County
Illinois

HABS No. ILL-1102

HABS
ILL,
16-CHIG,
86-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
801 - 19th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. ILL-1102

PONTIAC BUILDING

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Location: 542 South Dearborn Street, northwest corner Dearborn and Harrison Streets, Chicago, Cook County, Illinois.

Present Owner: Mary Bartelme Home for Girls. Managing agent: Arthur Rubloff and Co., 69 West Washington Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Present Use: Offices.

Statement of Significance: One of the early structures erected by the firm of Holabird and Roche, this skyscraper shows an unusual development of the wall into two-bay-wide oriels supported on rich foliated terra cotta brackets.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Legal description of the property: Lots 3, 4, 5 and part of 2 of Knight's Subdivision of Lots 30, 31 and 32 of Block 124 of the School Section Addition to Chicago, Section 16, Township 39, Range 14.

Chain of title, from the Chicago Title and Trust Company, tract book 239-8. The property on which the Pontiac building was to stand was purchased by Peter Brooks from the C. and W. Industrial Railroad and recorded under the name of his wife, Sarah L. Brooks, September 9, 1884 (Document 573974). Brooks retained possession of the property his entire life. The Pontiac Building was erected on it in 1891. On June 6, 1925 the Pontiac Building Corporation was set up. The trustees of Sarah Brooks estate placed the deed for the property in the custody of the Chicago Title and Trust who turned it over to the Pontiac Building Corporation, June 21, 1925 (Document 8961621). The Pontiac Building Corporation promptly mortgaged the property to the New England Mutual Life Insurance Co., June 22, 1925 (Document 8961622). The deed then passed from the insurance company to the 50-54 West Harrison Building Corporation, August 28, 1946 (Document 13885929). The property was sold by the 50-54 West Harrison Building Corporation to the Chicago Home for Girls, August 6, 1956 (Document 16701624). Since that time the name has changed to the Mary Bartelme Home for Girls, and the building has remained in the hands of this institution.

2. Date of erection: 1891, begun early in the year and finished late that same year.

3. Architect, engineer: William Holabird and Martin Roche, architects. The engineer was most probably Corydon T. Purdy, since Purdy colaborated with Holabird and Roche on the Katahdin (Monadnock) Building and the Marquette Building, which two buildings antedated and postdated the Pontiac building respectively.

4. Builder (contractor): George Fuller and Co.

5. Original plan and construction: Frank A. Randall, History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), pp. 125-126, has this entry for the Pontiac Building: "Pontiac Building, at the northwest corner of South Dearborn and West Harrison Streets, extending through to Federal Street, was built in 1891. It is 14 stories and one basement high, on spread foundations, with beam grillages and steel columns. Holabird and Roche were the architects. The original cost of the Pontiac Building, including architects' fees, was 29.152 cents per cubic foot. (From manuscript records of Edward A. Renwick, Architect, in possession of his son, Ralph Renwick.) A view is in Rand McNally and Co., Views of Chicago, 1898, page 81, with a description. A photograph is in Rand McNally and Co., Photographic Views of Chicago, 1902, and in the Chicago Central Business and Office Building Directory, The Winters Publishing Co., 1916, page 200." (Abbreviations filled in.)

   Carl W. Condit, The Chicago School of Architecture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 119-120, makes this comment on the Pontiac Building:
   "An unusual variation of the wall pattern first developed by Holabird and Roche /as in the Tacoma Building, 1886-1889/ appears in the Pontiac Building, erected in 1891 at 542 South Dearborn Street, where it still stands (Fig. 73). Instead of the usual projections whose individual width was limited to that of one bay, the architects here extended the wall outward in two wide projections, each spanning two bays. The projection at the center of each of the street elevations is conventional in form. No special functional requirement dictated this treatment, which gives the illusion of increasing the glass area of the wall. The Pontiac, like the Caxton and the Monadnock addition, shows a failure to exploit the steel frame to full utilitarian and formal advantage. The individual windows are small, and between the groups of openings, the envelope of the frame is solid brick throughout the height of the building. Shortly after the construction of the

Pontiac, however, Holabird and Roche took the decisive step in the architectonic revelation of steel framing in the design of the Marquette Building."

B. Bibliography:

Condit, Carl W. The Chicago School of Architecture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964. pp. 119-20. Fig. 73.

Fuller, George and Co. Prominent Buildings Erected. 1890-1904. pp. 6-7, 118-119.

Randall, Frank A. History of the Development of Building Construction in Chicago. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949. pp. 5, 93, 125-26, 178, 180.

Prepared by Leland M. Roth
Historian
National Park Service
Summer, 1967

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: One of the early structures erected by the firm of Holabird and Roche, this skyscraper shows an unusual development of the wall into two-bay-wide oriels supported on rich foliated terra cotta brackets.

2. Condition of fabric: Very good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Rectangular; 67'-0" x 101'-3"; three bays on south front, five bays on east front.

2. Foundations: Brick.

3. Wall construction: Hard surface red brick from the third floor on up, with terra cotta belt courses at window heads. The first and second floor are faced at columns and beams in dark red terra cotta, and corner piers are brick with stone at the lower portions. Bay window soffits and the cornice are of ornamented terra cotta.

4. Structural system, framing: Brick masonry bearing wall on north property line. Brick interior shear walls to resist wind loads across the 67' dimension. Brick bearing

piers at southeast and southwest corners. The rest of the structure is of skyscraper construction; i.e. metal columns and beams bearing the weight of the exterior masonry wall at each floor level.

5. Chimney: Brick.

6. Openings:

   a. Doorways and doors: The entrances to the building lobby have been modified, as has much of the store-front work. The ironwork on the west side facing a narrow street is probably the original. Elsewhere, aluminum doors and frames have been introduced in most cases.

   b. Windows: At the second floor, Chicago windows in shallow bow windows. Above, double-hung sash. The south wall has one projecting bay window and the west and east walls have three, two of these on each wall are the width of two bays of the structure rather than the customary one, passing around the column at the center. Sash are wood.

7. Roof:

   a. Shape, covering: Flat, with parapet. Built-up roofing.

   b. Cornice: Terra cotta.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Hall, elevators, and stairs are grouped along the north wall of the building. The shear wall divides the remaining space into two approximately equal parts.

2. Stairways: The stairways have marble treads on cast iron stringers and with cast iron risers.

3. Flooring: In general, the flooring is resilient or wood over concrete.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The plaster is smooth finish.

5. Doorways and doors: Doorways and doors are of wood frame.

6. Decorative features and trim: None remaining except the iron work of the elevator enclosures at the second and higher floors.

7. Lighting: Electric, conventional fixtures.

8. Heating: Central boiler and radiators.

D. Site and Surroundings:

General setting and orientation: The building faces streets on all but the north side. The main entrance is from the east. The street to the west is merely an alley. The present office center of the Loop ends two blocks farther north on South Dearborn. The immediate surroundings are third rate and for this reason much of the Pontiac Building is vacant.

Prepared by Wesley Shank
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
July 1967

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The records of this structure were made during the 1967 Chicago IV Project. This was the fourth in a series of summer projects designed to record the significant architecture of the Chicago area. The project was sponsored by the late Mr. Earl J. Reed, FAIA. He was assisted by John R. Fugard, FAIA, Treasurer, and Miss Agnes E. Hodges of the Chicago Chapter Foundation, and a Selection Committee consisting of James Arkin, AIA; Ruth Schoneman, Art Institute of Chicago; and J. Carson Webster, Northwestern University. Organizations cooperating with HABS in this project were: The Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects; the Chicago Chapter Foundation; the Chicago Community Trust; the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies; the Illinois Arts Council; and the Chicago Heritage Committee. The Council also made funds available for a Statewide Inventory Project with out-of-Chicago architects cooperating. Quarters were provided at Glessner House through the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation.

Mr. James C. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey, was in over-all charge of HABS summer programs. The Project Supervisor was Wesley Shank, Iowa State University. Other members of the summer team were: Historian, Leland Roth, University of Illinois, Urbana; Photographer, Philip Turner; Secretary, Mrs. Burt Schloss; and Student Assistant Architects: Keleal Nassin, Tulane University; Maurice Griffin, Illinois Institute of Technology; Allan Steenhusen and David Vyverberg, Iowa State University.